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Grace Vernon Buss

THE

Heroine of Western Australia.



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GRACE VERNON BUSSELL,

THE

HEROINE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA:

AND OTHER POEMS.

BY

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HARTFORD, CONN.:

PRESS OF THE CASE, LOCKWOOD & BRAINARD COMPANY.

1878.

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1878.



GRACE VERNON BUSSELL,

THE HEROINE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

The night closed in, and darkness like a pall,
The gaunt and creeping shadows overspread ;
While clouds of blackness hoarsely growled their rage,
Illumined by the lightning's fitful glare,
Which, far away behind the mountain peaks,
Seemed dancing, as tho' beckoning on the storm,
And panting for the sight of coming woe !
The hills kept silence, as in breathless awe ;
And trembled at the muttered threat of doom ;
While Grace, from out the window, gazed entranced ;
Till, startled by the cricket's sharp shrill cry
Which by the sultry air, and deepening gloom
Was coaxed in noisy march from out the wall :

Then, she arose ; drew in and closed the blinds ;
And wishing each " Good night, and pleasant dreams,"
She soon was kneeling by her own soft couch,
And breathing out her solemn evening prayer.

Ere she arose, the rising wind, in grief
Was sighing, moaning, through the forest trees ;
And in a moment more, the howling blast
Burst overhead ; and made her heart stand still.
But, when at last the frightful din had ceased,
And rush and roar were followed by the rain,
Secure beneath the well-thatched roof, she slept !
How long, none knew. She slept, and dreamed and
waked ;

Waked with a cry of horror, loud and long,
That roused each slumbering inmate of the house.
The storm had passed, and through the rattling blinds
The moon sent kindly beams ; yet, lingering winds
Seemed like the distant wail of breaking hearts. .

At length, offended and reluctant sleep
Came slowly back, and softly kissed away
The whispered prayer upon her parted lips. .
But, when the clock struck three, with sudden start,

With trembling, and with wildly throbbing heart
She woke again ; and, to her fancy wild,
Excited by the thrice-repeated dream,
Each hammer-stroke seemed like a signal-gun
Of vessel in distress, far out to sea.
She dreamed that, in the darkness and the storm,
She saw a steam-ship thrown upon the rocks,
And terror-stricken sailors crowd the boats ;
And heard a mother's frantic cry for aid ;
Who, with a lovely infant in her arms,
With streaming eyes and wild imploring look,
Was clinging to the parting wreck for life ;
While each mad wave struck at her frail support,
And coldly mocked her prayer and cherished hope.

So vivid and so real was the dream
That Grace arose, impatient for the light,
Resolved upon a visit to the shore
At break of day, although ten miles away.
No sooner did the twilight gild the East,
Than Ned, the drowsy stable-boy, was called
To feed the young and handsome dapple-gray ;
A horse as fleet and tireless as the wind,
The pride of all the town and country round.

All things made ready for the rapid ride,
Grace paced the hall, with restless, anxious step;
With frequent sigh, that time dragged on so slow,
And with her hand upon her aching heart;
For still she seemed to see upon the wreck
The bloodless faces of that vessel's crew;
Still seemed to hear that mother's piteous wail,
And the low smothered sob of her sweet babe!

Just as the sun had crowned the highest hills,
The dapple-gray was neighing at the door,
As in impatient haste to be away.
With gentle words, Grace stroked his arching neck;
While Ned put on an extra linen girth:
Then, bounding to the saddle in a trice,
She bravely galloped down the forest path;
Nor slackened speed, till she had reached the cliff,
Which, high above the beach, o'erlooked the sea.
Then she beheld a scene that thrilled her through,
And dimmed her eyes with sympathetic woe!

Far out from shore, a ship was on the rocks;
And passengers and crew, upon the wreck,
With angry waves were battling hard for life.

Midway between the stranded ship and shore,
A capsized boat was drifting to and fro ;
And to it mothers with their children clung ;
While clear, above the breakers' deafening roar,
Grace heard a woman's cry, which chilled her blood :
And waiting not, she sought a rugged path
Down which the hardy wreckers sometimes climbed,
And down the fearful steep, with frightful leaps,
O'er trunks of fallen trees and ragged rocks,
As tho' upheld by angel hands, she rode !
Nor did she pause till her strong dapple-gray
Stood panting, on the rough and wreck-strewn shore.

Then, while the noisy waves broke round his feet,
She leaned upon his neck in fond caress,
And sobbed, " Now, Hero, comes the tug of war !
Those mothers and their children must be saved,
Or friends will never welcome our return ! "
Then, raising her dark, glistening eyes to heaven,
Her hat was lifted from her classic brow ;
Her cheeks were wet with mingled spray and tears ;
Her golden ringlets streaming in the wind ;
While from her livid lips burst forth the prayer :
" O thou who once didst walk upon the waves,

And to thy tempest-tossed disciples come
With words of cheer, and calm the troubled deep ;
Hear me, and calm my wildly beating heart !
Give Hero strength ; and give me nerve to guide ;
That we may safely bring from threatened death
The helpless ones now struggling in the surf ! ”
A moment more, and drawing close the rein,
Grace and her fearless steed were in the sea,
And wrestling hard with the tumultuous floods !

With tearful eyes, and anxious, aching hearts,
They watched her from the distant trembling wreck ;
And saw her rise from overwhelming waves,
When horse and rider both, at times, seemed lost.
And once, entangled in a broken raft,
Her princely steed seemed ready to despair,
And dropped his neck upon a broken spar !
But Grace's quick cry gave him new strength and life,
And bravely, with caress, she urged him on.

The second line of roaring breakers passed,
They reached the boat, and safely brought ashore
Each half-drowned woman, and with each her child ;
And last of all, a half-dead sailor boy !

Then, while with hawser stretched from ship to shore
The stronger helped the weaker ones to land,
To tell the news, and bring the rescued aid,
Grace whirled away, all dripping from the waves,
The sea-foam dropping from the flowing mane
And quivering flanks of her proud dapple-gray ;
Nor did the noble fellow's courage fail,
Till he was standing by her father's door ;
From whence, with needful stores, her startled friends
Were hastening soon, to wrecked ones on the shore.





THE OLD MAN'S ARREST.

Stay ! watchman, stay ! why roughly sieze
A wreck like me ? My trembling knees
Refuse to bear along the street
My aching heart ! My weary feet,—
Now blistered with the long day's tramp,
Although the night is chill and damp,—
Protest against attempt to find
A place of rest, with human kind :
Let me lie here ; I'll do no harm ;
The box and straw will keep me warm :
Just wrap me in this ragged plaid,
And let me rest :—I am not mad !

Because I prayed so hard to die,
And talked of Nell, you thought that I

Must be a madman, raving wild !
And who is Nell ? She is my child.
I daily pray with every breath
To be with her ; and hence, for death.
She had her mother's face, so fair ;
The same dark eyes, and auburn hair ;—
“ Why talk of her so much ? ” Why, she,
Of all the world, cared most for me !
Of kindred, she was all I had ;
'Twould not be strange if I were mad.

How oft she sought, with radiant face,
With laugh and shout, my warm embrace.
No fairer child was ever pressed
To father's palpitating breast,
Than little Nell ;—so dear to me ;
So often dandled on my knee.
At nightfall, when I reached my home,
Her loving lips would seek my own,
And then, her soft arms she would press
About my neck, in fond caress,
And softly lisp : “ Nell feel so bad
When papa's gone ! ” Call me not mad.

When from the door I turned away,
She dropped all toys, and ceased to play ;
And running to her little chair,
In eager haste, and watching there,
With chin upon the window sill ;
Her sweet " Good by," my heart would thrill ;
And as the gate would backward swing,
Her dimpled hand a kiss would fling !
Then she would say, with gentle sigh,
With trembling lip, and tearful eye,
And drooping head, and look so sad,
" My Papa 's gone ! " Call me not mad.

No dark brown eyes now watch for me ;
No loved one climbs upon my knee ;
No arms upon my shoulders rest ;
No cheek against my own is pressed ;
No rosy lips now touch my own,
No voice of love now welcomes home !
My ears shall never, never more,
Hear her light footsteps on the floor,
As when, in coming from the store,
She ran to meet me by the door,

And sweetly said: "Nell is so glad
Her papa's come!" Call me not mad.

Ah! how these temples throb with pain;
And yet you say, "Go on again!"
You fain would have me tell how all
My joy of life was turned to gall:—
"How long since then?" The days and years
Have all been marked by sighs and tears.
But,—well, I cannot talk of death,
My words grow thick and stop my breath:
They tore her from my arms, and said,
I must be still,—that she was dead!
No heavier woe man ever had;
You hurt me when you call me mad.

Low in the dust she now is laid,
Beneath the stately elm's deep shade!
To me its branches seem to sing
A sad and tender requiem.
For her who was my happy bride,
For her who was my joy and pride,
They dug the grave both deep and wide,

And Nell is sleeping by her side !
Now I am wandering all alone ;
Friends I have none, nor earthly home :
Yet to my breaking heart you add
Reproach and pain ; you call me mad !

I did not wish my grief to tell,
I thought it known by all too well ;
And could I all the tale unfold,
And paint the pangs I leave untold,—
Should you in sympathy for me
Shed tears enough to fill the sea,
'Twould lift no burden from my heart,
Relieve no pain, and ease no smart !
Till death, my griefs alone I'll bear,
Though I no mourning robes may wear ;
Frown not that I am meanly clad,
But pity me ; I am not mad.

Could you have known what burning tears
These eyes have rained through all these years,
The friends from whom I had to part,
The burdens of my broken heart,

You would not with gruff voice and blow
Have bade me to the mad-house go!
And could you know how this poor frame
Is hourly racked and cramped with pain,
You could not ask the reason why
I moan, and pray, and long to die;
For my release you would be glad;
You would not frown, nor think me mad.

“Why am I poor?” The very day
That Nellie died, my health gave way;
Then came the fire! the store was burned,—
To pay for goods the house was turned;
And I was left alone,—to roam
A beggar, without friend or home.
No, thank you, watchman! I’ve no fear
That anything will hurt me here:
This box and straw and open shed
Will do as well as softest bed.
They’ll think me but some homeless lad;
Let me lie here;—I am not mad.



THE FUNERAL.

It was up among the mountains,
'Midst the wilds of North New Hampshire,
In a glen of wondrous beauty,
Known by many as "The Dove's Nest."
Here we found the little cottage,
Half concealed by climbing woodbine,
In the loveliest seclusion,
Lovelier than poet's fancy,
Fit abode for fabled fairies.

Roses clambered o'er the windows,
And above the rustic porches,
Filling all the air with fragrance ;
While from terrace walls were drooping
Honeysuckle and nasturtium,
Which, with beds of rare verbenas,
And the smiling garden border,

All seemed looking up and telling
 How the nest was loved and tended.
 High, and facing to the southward,
 Half the cottage roof o'er-hanging,
 Crowned with poplars and white birches,
 Rose a moss-grown ledge of granite,
 Whose pale cheeks the early sunbeams
 Kissed and flushed with radiant gladness.
 To our left, but in the distance,
 Spread a dark and pathless forest,
 With its tower-like spurs of hemlock ;
 To our right, a crystal streamlet
 Long by beetling crags o'ershadowed ;
 While above them, in the background,
 Lofty pines, a fearless sentry,
 Long had braved the storms of winter,
 Long from piercing blasts had sheltered.

Standing in the open door-way,
 Scenes of rarest charm enthralled us ;
 Scenes like brightest fields elysian
 In the Oriental vision !
 In the clear transparent waters

Of a matchless.gem-like lakelet,
All were mirrored in perfection,
As in burnished shield of silver ;
Cottage, rocks, and drooping birches,
Pines, and roses, and gray mosses !
Every blossom on the hillside
Was in form and hue reflected !

Far away, the sun was sinking,
Slowly, to the dim horizon ;
Veiled by golden-tinted curtains,
Fringed with purple and vermilion,
Looped 'neath banks of silvery vapor,
To the peaks of snow-capped mountains,
Wreathed in ever-changing splendors ;
Prophecy of heavenly glories !

Here, to this fair type of Eden,
There had come a grim intruder ;
And the gentle mountain birdling,
Child of only ten short summers,
Chilled and paled by death's stern whisper,
Wrapped in her last dreamless slumber,

Waited now the solemn service,
The last tribute of affection.

In her hand were choicest rosebuds,
While with vines and opening flowers
She was crowned and robed for burial.
Chosen classmates, in their sorrow,
From the quiet little hamlet
Far below us in the valley,
With the sweetest floral offerings,
Had come up the winding pathway ;
And were seated with the mourners,
Waiting the appointed signal
Of the honored "Mountain Shepherd,"
Ere the favorite hymn they chanted.

Soon, he rose and, slowly, calmly,
Read the words of inspiration ;
Read of death, and its dark shadows ;
Of the coming resurrection ;
Of the changeless heavenly mansions ;
Read of Christ and bliss eternal !
Then, he bowed in supplication ;
And his tender accents mingled

With the sobs and lamentations
Of the broken-hearted weepers,
In their loneliness and anguish !
Fervently he made petition
That with sweetest consolation
Christ would visit the bereaved ones ;
That the Comforter,—the Spirit,
Whose bright wing once flashed o'er Jordan,
As an emblematic witness,
Would afford to them some token
That their darling was immortal,
And with angels now in glory !

Scarcely had the words been uttered
Ere the sound of rustling pinions
Every eye and thought arrested !
Through the vines and open window
Came a dove of snowy whiteness,
Thrice the mourning group encircling
With slow awe-inspiring motion ;
Then, with graceful sweep, alighted
On the kneeling suppliant's shoulder,
Strangely motionless remaining,
Till the touching prayer was ended ;

Then amidst the cliff's dark shadows,
Like a flash of light it vanished !

Soon, with overwhelming wonder,
Every face was white as marble.
Rising for the closing hymnal,
Hardly one short line was chanted
Ere the airy curtains parted,
And the dove was circling round us,
Hovering over the chief singer,
As though forms unseen had charmed it.

It was only for a moment :
Soon, upon his head it rested,
Gently, as the pearly dew-drop
Falls upon the thirsty meadow ;
Rested, till the song was finished ;
Tranquil as the babe will nestle
In the fond maternal bosom !
Then, it gracefully descended,
Resting on the open casket ;
And with smothered note of mourning,
Strangely low, and soft, and thrilling ;
Gazed upon the silent sleeper !

Children wept with joy and trembling ;
Mourners breathlessly looked round them,
Half assured, and half inquiring ;
Could it be the longed-for token ?
One, with quivering accents, whispered,
It is some strange apparition,
Or a messenger from heaven !
Then, long pent up floods of sorrow
Once more, sought and found their freedom,
Till each breath of air seemed moaning,
And each falling tear seemed burdened,
With its freight of speechless anguish.
Yet, the mourning dove still lingered ;
And its notes were softly lengthened,
Till each voice was awed to silence ;
Till each lip and tongue seemed palsied ;
Till the preacher calmly answered :
Can the Prince of Life Eternal,
By a providence so startling,
Mock, when human hearts are breaking ?
He who marks the falling sparrow,
And each mortal grief doth measure,
Condescends our prayer to answer.

Cherish no dread superstition !
Mysteries are all about us,
Mysteries in light and darkness,
And in every form of beauty ;
Mystery in living, dying ;
Mystery in this dove's presence,
But no more than in its being !
Till we reach the very summit
Of sublimest heights in glory,
Mysteries may e'er surround us
Like these changing mountain shadows.
Some, now linked with joy or sorrow,
May be solved for us to-morrow !



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